

# The AUCTION BLOCK

## BY REX BEACH

CHAPTER XV.

Merkle found his chauffeur just closing the garage door, and three minutes later his car was sweeping westward through the park like the shadow of some flying bird. The vagueness, the brevity of the message that had come to him out of the night made it terribly alarming. Jarvis Hammon's financial interests were in no condition to withstand a shock for a long time many of them had been under fire. He had squandered his associates to a program of commercial expansion, never too severe even under favorable conditions, and now, moreover, which had provoked a tremendous assault from rival manufacturers. Now, with Hammon himself stricken at the crisis of the struggle, there was no telling what results might follow.

But Merkle's apprehensions were by no means purely selfish. Hammon and he had been friends for many years; they shared a mutual respect and affection, and although Merkle was eminently practical and unemotional, he prayed now as best he could that Hammon might not be grievously injured.

As the machine drew up to the Elegancia, Dinky Knight leaped to the machine seat and said hurriedly:

"Send your driver away."

Merkle did as he was directed, realizing his worst fears. When he and Jim stood alone on the walk he inquired weakly, "Is he—dead?"

Jim shook his head, and Merkle saw that he was deeply agitated. "No, but he's got a bullet in his chest."

Together the men entered the building and at the next ring were admitted to Apartment No. 3 by Lorelei herself. She led them straight into the library.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour had elapsed since the shooting, but Jarvis Hammon still sat in the big chair. He was breathing quietly. Bob Wharton stood beside him.

"John!" The ironmaster snuffed pathetically as his friend came and knelt beside him. "You got here quickly."

"Are you badly hurt, Jarvis?"

"The thing is in here somewhere."

Hammon took his hand away from his breast, and Merkle saw that the fingers were bloody. "Can you get me out of these clothes?"

John March rose to his full height, his lips whitened back from his teeth. He had inquired: "Where is that wound?"

"Here, back under my arm."

"Bob, take care!"

Merkle turned, but, reading his friend's face, he did not move. "She's a coker—she's killed herself up. But, say—you don't really think she—did it, do you?"

"I don't know what to think. It's just as bad, either way. Hammon's wife and daughters must never know. Now, quick. See what you can do with her."

Merkle returned to the library, sent Lorelei in to her brother's assistance, then scanned his friend's face anxiously. But Hammon had not moved. The sweat still stood upon his lips and forehead, his jaws were still set like stone.

Several months before, Bob Wharton, during one of his hilarious moments, had conceived the brilliant notion of hiring a four-wheeler and driving a convivial party of friends from place to place. The success of his exploit had been so gratifying that he had repeated the performance, but he was in a far different mood now as he left the Elegancia. The shock of Lorelei's announcement, the sight of his stricken friend, had sobered him considerably, yet he was not himself by any means. At one moment he saw and reasoned clearly, at the next his intoxication benumbed his senses and distorted his mental vision. For once in his life he wished himself sober.

Broadway, that pulsating artery of New York life, was still flowing a thin stream of traffic despite the lateness of the hour, and Bob's mind had become clearer by the time he reached it. Several taxicabs whirled past, both north and south bound, but he knew better than to hire them, so he waited as patiently as he could while those billows of intoxication continued to ebb and flow through his brain, robbing him of that careful judgment which he fought to retain.

At last the clomp-clomp of a horse's hoofs sounded close by, and an unshaven man in an ancient high hat steered a four-wheeler to the curb, barking, "Reb, reb!"

Bob lurched forward and laid a hand upon the driver's knee. "Very much I'm looking for." The hiccup that followed was by no means intentional.

"Yes, sir. Where to, sir?"

But Bob shook his head vigorously and waved a comprehensive gesture toward the west. "Got a party of my own back yonder—everybody's been but me—understand? I'm the only sober one, so I'm going to drive 'em home, see? How much?"

"How much for what?" demanded the cabman.

"For the cab—one hour. I'll bring it back."

Nothing except Bob's personal appearance prevented the driver from whipping up without more ado. The night was old—and those jokers sometimes pay well, the man reflected.

"How'd I know you'd bring it back?" he inquired.

"Matter of honor with me. I'll be back in no time. Will ten dollars be right? I'll make it fifteen, and you can lend me your coat and hat. We'll

exchange—have to, or no joke. Is it a go?"

The offer was tempting, but the driver calmly demanded Wharton's name and address before committing himself. The card that Bob handed him put an end to the parley; he wheeled into the side street and removed his long, nickel-buttoned coat and his battered felt, taking Bob's broadcloth and well-blocked hat in return.

"First one o' these I ever had on," he chuckled. "If you ain't back I'll take these glad rags to Charley Vole's hotel, eh?"

"Right! The Charlevoix. But I'll be back." Bob drove away with a parting flourish of his whip.

The elevator was in its place, the hall-man dozing when Wharton entered the Elegancia and rang the bell of Lorelei's apartment. Once he had gained admittance little time was wasted. He and Merkle helped Hammon to his feet, then each took an arm; but the exertion told, and Jarvis hung between them like a drunken man, a gray look of death upon his face.

"Watch out for the door-man," Jimmy Knight cautioned for the twentieth time. "Make him think you've got a

sones."

"Aren't you coming along?" asked Bob.

But Jim recoiled. "Me? No. I'll stay and help Lorelei make her getaway."

Merkle nodded agreement. "Don't let her get out of your sight, either, understand? There's a ship sailing in the morning. See that she's aboard."

Jarvis Hammon spoke. "I want you all to know that I'm entirely to blame and that I did this myself. Lorelei is a good girl." The words came laboriously, but his jaw was square. "I was clumsy. I ought have killed her. But she's all right, and I'll be all right, too, when I get a doctor. Now put that pistol in my pocket, John. Do as I say. There! Now I'm ready."

Bob Wharton mounted the box and drove to Central Park West. At Sixty-seventh street he wheeled into the sunken causeway that links the East and West sides.

Once in the shadows, Merkle leaned from the door, crying softly, "Faster! Faster!"

Bob whipped up, the horse cantered, the cab reeled and bounced over the cobblestones, rocking the wounded man pitifully.

To John Merkle the ride was terrible, with a drunkard at the reins and in his arms a perhaps fatally injured man, who, despite the tortures of that bumping carriage, interspersed his groans with cries of "Hurry, hurry!"

When he felt the grateful smoothness of Fifth avenue beneath the wheels he leaned forth a second time and warned Bob. "Be careful of the watchman in the block."

The liquor in Bob was dying; he bent downward to inquire, "Is he all right?"

Merkle nodded, then withdrew his head.

The Hammon residence has changed owners of late, but many people recall its tragic associations and continue to point it out with interest. It is a massive pile of gray stone, standing just east of Fifth avenue, and its bronze doors open upon an exclusive, well-kept side street. At the farther corner, dimly discernible beneath the radiance of a street light, Bob made out the watchman, now at the end of his patrol. The moment was propitious; there could be no further delay.

Bob reined in and leaped from his box. Merkle had the cab door open and was holding Hammon from his seat.

"Have you got the key?" Bob asked, swiftly.

"Yes. Help me! He's fainted, I think."

They lifted the half-conscious man out, then with him between them struggled up the steps; but Hammon's feet dragged; he hung very heavy in their arms.

Merkle was not a strong man; he was panting, and his hands shook as he fumbled with the lock. The key escaped him and tinkled upon the stone.

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man." Bob was gazing over his shoulder at the slowly approaching figure.

A second but briefer delay, and they stood in the gloom of the marble foyer hall. Then they shuffled across the floor to the great, curving stairway.

Hammon had assured them that there would be no one in the house except Orson, his man, and some of the kitchen servants, the others having followed their mistress to the country; nevertheless the rearers were painfully

tired, and they tried to go as silently as burglars; when they finally gained the library, they were drenched with perspiration. Merkle switched on the lights; they deposited the wounded man on a couch and bent over him.

Hammon was not dead. Merkle felt his way into the darkened regions at the rear and returned with a glass of spirits. Under his and Bob's ministrations the unconscious man opened his eyes.

"You got me here, didn't you?" he whispered, as he took in his surroundings. "Now go—everything is all right."

"We're not going to leave you," Merkle said, positively.

"No!" echoed Bob. "I'll wake up Orson while John telephones the doctor."

But Hammon forbade Bob's movement with a frown. It was plain that despite his weakness his mind remained clear.

"Listen to me," he ordered. "Prop me up—but me in that chair. I'm choking." They did as he directed.

"That's better. Now, you mustn't be seen here—either of you. We can't explain." He checked Merkle. "I know best. Go home! It's only two blocks—I'll telephone."

"You'll ring for Orson quick?"

Hammon nodded.

"Rotten way to leave a man," Bob mumbled. "I'd rather stick it out and face the music."

"Go, go! You're wasting time." Hammon's brow was wrinkled with pain and anger. "You've been good; now hurry."

Merkle's thin face was marked with deep feeling. "Yes," he agreed. "There's nothing else for us to do; but tell Orson to 'phone me quick. I'll be back here in five minutes." Then he and Bob stole out of the house as quietly as they had stolen in.

They got into the cab and drove away without exciting suspicion. Merkle alighted two blocks up the avenue and sped to his own house; Bob turned his faded nag westward through the sunken road that led toward the Elegancia and Lorelei.

The owner of the equipage was waiting patiently, and there still lacked something of the allotted hour when the exchanged garments had been transferred to their respective owners. Bob walked toward the Elegancia with a feeling of extreme fatigue in his limbs, for the effort to conquer his intoxication had left him weak; he dimly realized also that he was still far from sober.

There was no answer when he rang at Lorelei's apartment; the hall-boy volunteered the information that the occupant had just gone out with a gentleman. Miss Knight? Yes, she was upstairs, he supposed. Bob was surprised at his wife's apparent self-control when she let him in. Except for the slim hand pressed to her bosom and the anxiety lurking in her deep blue eyes, she might have just come from the theater. Those eyes, he noted, were very dark, almost black, under this emotional stress; they questioned him, mutely.

"We got him home all right," he told

her, when they stood facing each other in the tiny living room.

"Will he live?"

"Oh, yes. He says he's not badly hurt, and Merkle agrees. Lord! We'd never left him alone if we'd thought—"

"I'm glad. When you rang I thought—it was the police."

"There, there!" he said, comfortingly, seeing her tremble. "I won't let anybody hurt you. I was terribly drunk—things are swimming yet—but all the way across town I couldn't think of

anything, anybody except you and what it would mean to you if it got out."

"It will get out, I'm sure. Such things always do."

He eyed her gravely, kindly, with an expression she had never seen upon his face.

"Then—we'll face it together," he said.

After a moment her glance drooped, a faint color tinged her cheeks. "I wouldn't dare face it alone. I couldn't."

(Continued Next Saturday)

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